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1920s

by Rose Storm Summers, 1923

The Terrible Twenties took over our lives while I was a freshman at Ames. Following on the heels of the "War To End Wars," there were so many changes in our way of life that our generation was wholly unaware we were to become the symbol of the great upheaval in social traditions. We just considered ourselves a little more "progressive" than older brothers and sisters—considerably more progressive than our parents!

Indoctrination of coeds was delicately phrased but specific in detail. The Dean of Women, trying valiantly to hold the line, assumed we were all ladies, and as such we would:

Always be completely dressed, including gloves, before we left our rooms; for to put on gloves in public would be as immodest as to put on hose.

When on dates, try to join at least one other couple in crossing the campus after dark.

When conversing directly with a gentleman, avoid using words that shaped our lips provocatively, such as "prunes" or "soup"; if it were necessary to use such a word, we must turn our faces so he would not be tempted beyond his control.

The latter seemed to hint that college fellows were delightfully more dangerous than the ones we'd gone with in high school, and we could hardly wait to try these words out on our first dates.

Secure in the knowledge that if my date got too fresh I could always slap him, I grasped the first opportunity to smile intimately up at him and ask, "Did your dinner start with soup?"

When all he did was to answer, "Gosh, no!" I tried again, enunciating carefully, "Ours did — and for dessert we had the most delicious prune whip!"

At that he clutched my elbow and started propelling me down the cinder path at a dog trot. I thought, "Oh boy! That double dare was too much for him!" and hung back so we wouldn't get separated from the other couple.

But he only shoved me more vigorously, explaining, "Here comes the Dinky round the bend! Hurry up or we'll miss it and have to walk to town!" And we all took off at a healthy gallop.

No different from high school dates.

Just before the Engineer's Campfire in October, "Dean H" admonished us to beware of any

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1930s

by Laura Christensen Daily, 1935

There are two college-age persons who live at our house and call me "Mom," and they are reasonably well-informed about American history, sociology, economics, and other aspects of our culture. Yet they have one blind spot. They believe that the time of their parent's youth is known as the Olden Days; everyone who lived then was a righteous, thrifty, ambitious "square," and certainly college life bore no resemblance to the enlightened way they are living it now.

"Well, I have news for them, as well as for the rest of you who may share this view — fundamentally our college life was just the same as yours. It is merely some of the "trappings" that have changed.

Just as the center of our Iowa State campus remains substantially the same, decade after decade, so the core of our lives was the same.

Even some of those "trappings" were the same — we ate grilled rolls in the Union, complained bitterly about Union coffee while drinking cup after cup (although most of us had to learn to like coffee after coming to college); Bill Schramper had "Ladies Day" in his business law classes with the same effects; student leaders and faculty complained about the exodus from the campus over Veishea weekend; we struggled with the *Homemaker budget*; we even believed in the tradition of the Campanile at midnight.

Our serious discussions dealt with the same problems — the state of the world (Could it survive another World War?); the state of the nation (Was the New Deal going to make us a welfare state?); the state of the campus.

However, there were differences. The thing that influenced our lives in the Thirties was, of course, the Great Depression. It's hard to know, looking back, whether we realized we were going through such an ordeal or not. I'm inclined to think we went along from day to day thinking of it as normal. However, I don't want to minimize the effect. The hard work, the learning to manage, a certain amount of the self-denial may have been good character builders. I am not sure that the insecurity, the extremity of the self denial, and the sense of futility were.

I can only give you a personal experience. Quarterly tuition was then \$32. Counting a \$20 scholarship, my expenses averaged about \$25 for fees and

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young man who attempted to take a blanket to the Campfire. Of course we had all been on high school picnics where blankets to sit on were standard equipment — to say nothing of bob-sled parties where we were buried up to our noses in blankets. But “Dean H” could make even a wool square throb with portent.

About time for our dates to arrive several of us gathered in one girl's room to discuss what we should do about this dilemma. We agreed if any fellow showed up with a blanket it would be too embarrassing for the girl to mention the danger involved; so we would say nothing, but each of us would keep her in sight so she wouldn't be forced to defend her virtue alone.

Just then the girl nearest the window screamed, “Oh, look!” Every path leading to the dorm was almost solid with boys bearing blankets, the few empty-armed ones conspicuous for their drabness. Someone sang out, “There's safety in numbers!” and we hurried off in blithe anticipation that surely something exciting would happen. We really felt a little let down when, back in our rooms, not a one could report anything approaching a dangerous situation. We decided the Dean must have been raised in a different environment than we had.

Nevertheless, we all went home for Christmas feeling we were pretty worldly. When one of the home town boys who was a senior at Iowa asked me to the Athens Club New Year's Ball at a Des Moines hotel, I knew I had “arrived.”

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“You want some ice cream, too, Kipper? Some of that yummy kind from the D.I. Building salesroom.”

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I had left my only formal at Ames and was too small for any I could borrow from friends, so I had to whip one up out of an old taffeta "Sunday" dress. Mother was wonderfully helpful in seeing to it that I didn't expose any bare skin to the elements. Mother was a determined woman, so we compromised: I could make it without sleeves if I would wear my midseason underwear! That garment wasn't quite as hateful as regular winter underwear — at least it ended just below the knees and had a vest top with inch-wide straps over the shoulders. There was a drawstring inserted around the top to be pulled up to your throat line when it was really cold, and Mother thought I had better not alter the neck of the dress, for if the temperature stayed at zero, I'd surely want to pull that string up tight!

I accidentally slashed the dress right in the front so had to open up the neck line, but Mother hurriedly fixed a little ruffled georgette dickey to fill the space. I groaned inwardly, but knew I dared not stress the point too far, or she would refuse to let me go.

And certainly I wasn't going to wear those flimsy little slippers the whole twenty-two miles to Des Moines, even if Sid did have four fur rugs in the car! So she scrounged a slipper-bag somewhere in the neighborhood, and I docily laced up my high top shoes.

The minute I saw that roomy velvet slipper-bag, I knew my underwear problem had been solved. In the bag I hid my nicest suit of embroidered (with French knots, yet!) cross-bar dimity "teddy bears," and a bottle of perfume.

Although I had known Sid since childhood (Mother always felt either of her girls were safe



Daring Bathing Beauties of the 1920's.

when they were out with Sid), I just couldn't confess that I had to stop somewhere and change my underwear, so I concocted a seemingly logical excuse for stopping at the home of a college friend who lived on the outskirts of Des Moines.

Grace and her mother were somewhat startled at the invasion but when I shared the secret, they joyfully helped with the conspiracy, Mrs. Bowie deftly removing the dickey and giving me some tiny safety pins to pin it back in before I got home. (Mother always waited up till we were in, and would be sure to notice the missing dickey.)

The dance was the epitome of every girl's dream. Sid had exchanged more than half the dances, and every man was real smooth! That was flattering, for if a girl wasn't a good dancer, her date had to keep most of the dances for himself, trading only with fellows who weren't very good, either. One of the smoothest dancers was from Duke, and he was teaching me the "Bunny-Hug" when Sid circled by and stopped us.

Many of the girls were products of Eastern Finishing Schools and wore their elegance with svelte and bored sophistication. Some of them even smoked cigarettes as they sauntered around the lobby — right in public! (Of course some of the girls at Ames had done some experimental smoking after the lights were out, blowing the smoke out the windows. Afterwards they dabbled perfume around on the bedding and drapes and chewed Sen Sen like mad to cover the smell.

I probably looked more like a shepherdess than a siren; but I was determined I wouldn't act impressed by this blasé smoking, so forced my face into what I hoped was an equally bored expression, pretending I, too, was just dropping in on a little midwestern school dance — pleasant but not exciting. But I had a hard time retaining my composure when we strolled by a secluded corner and saw a couple drinking from flasks!

I was lucky that I had this bit of rehearsal, for at midnight the floor show swept in; and Sid and I found ourselves in the front row, only a few feet



Rose Storm, 1923

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from the performers. Star of the show was a Theda Bara-type dancer, clothed only in a few wisps of bead-encrusted chiffon. Several of the girls gasped, but I maintained what I hoped was an aloof expression. This became increasingly difficult, because as the girl danced, the beads began dropping off! Suddenly Sid whispered, "Don't look so much like your mother!" This deflated my ego, but by then the beads were bouncing and rolling under our feet and the fellows began to snicker. That broke the tension and the dancer — and she retreated to the wings in a hurry.

Safely home, I hurried past Mother's droop-eyed scrutiny with the dickey in place. If she detected the extra bulge of underwear in the slipper-bag she didn't let on. Mother was pure Irish, and if her youngest spalpeen hadn't outwitted her now and then, she would have worried.

I decided as I drifted off to sleep that there was too much fun to be had in life, I couldn't be bothered going back to college. But the next morning some of the glittering events began to look a little shabby, and I knew I'd rather get an education. So I returned to the campus with some sober purposes dominating my thoughts.

As soon as we had finished the shrill regaling of vacation experiences we settled in for winter on the campus. With only a handful of cars among the students, no one left the campus except for weddings or funerals. We went everywhere by foot, but there was S R O for every event — No one even thought of staying home because it was blizzarding. If it were a real dress-up affair, we wore suede spats over our slippers, and if we forgot the buttonhook, we used a hairpin to fasten them for the return home.

The field of journalism was just opening up for women. This was another aftermath of the war, for while the men were in service their places had been filled with women and girls whose work was of such high quality that temporary appointments became permanent, even at the executive level, and the door was open for a new and exciting career.

So many traditions had been broken that women felt quite daring — at times a little giddy with self-importance. Anything the men could do, the girls could do better. The men published the humor magazine *The Green Gander*, so the girls put out *The Emerald Goose*, and made more money than the rival magazine. The men had their professional magazines, so Bess Storm dreamed up *The Iowa Homemaker*. Not only did advertising have to be sold, but so did subscriptions, for no one had thought of having this a part of the fees.

With half as many students, there were almost as many events held, offices filled, and committees assigned. This meant more jobs for each person; but there was less red tape involved, so tasks were more easily accomplished. When something needed to be done, often only one person was assigned and, unencumbered with committee members and coordinating committees, the one person went out and got it done in a hurry.

We not only had to do all our extracurricular activities on foot, but the girls had many fewer hours for such things. Every girl had to be in her residence at 9:00 p.m. on school nights, and lights had to be out at 10:00. On Friday nights we could be out until 10:30, Saturday until 12:00, and Sunday until 10:00. We had no Kleenex nor nylon — even handkerchiefs had to be washed and ironed. There were no automatic laundries, so most of us sent our laundry home. But the pressing! With no wrinkle-resistant materials, and all cottons heavily starched, we spent more time at the ironing board than any other one place. There were no electric hair dryers, and the pounds of long hair to be washed and dried created a real problem.

Gym clothes were white middie blouses, red satin ties, pleated wool bloomers, and long stockings, winter and summer. Dance costumes included long cotton stockings, dyed to match — bare legs were taboo anywhere in public, although a few venturesome girls were going swimming without stockings (away from Ames, of course!).

Confident that there would never be any more wars, that we could look ahead to lifetimes of peace and prosperity, we were expansive with enthusiasm. Plans were under way for the first Veis-hea, and some visionary engineers were tinkering with something called radio. They claimed they could talk through the air without any wires! Fantastic! But anything was possible.

New organizations blossomed on the campus new courses were added to the curricula. Fraternities and sororities plunged deeply into debt to build larger houses, and wooden dormitories dotted the lawn east of the three brick ones then in use. Best news of all was that at last we were to have a recreation building of our own — a Memorial Union — paid for with student subscriptions and operated by and for the students.

So we fell in and out of love, most of us in again, with no thought of getting married until we graduated and had our debts paid. A man who would have suggested getting married before he could support a home would have been considered a pretty slippery character. Because the bride was expected to just keep house and raise a family — any thought of a career vanished with the "I do's."

Ha!